

Why May Day Matters to Botswana

A history with anarchist roots

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When we commemorate May Day we rarely reflect on why it is a public holiday in Africa or elsewhere. Sian Byrne, Paliani Chinguwo, Warren McGregor, and Lucien van der Walt tell of the powerful struggles that lie behind its existence.

INTRODUCTION

May Day, international workers day, started as a global general strike commemorating five anarchist labour organisers executed in 1887 in the USA. Mounting the scaffold, August Spies declared:

‘If you think that by hanging us you can stamp out the labor movement – the movement from which the downtrodden millions, the millions who toil and live in want and misery – the wage slaves – expect salvation – if this is your opinion, then hang us! Here you will tread upon a spark, but there, and there, and behind you and in front of you, and everywhere, flames will blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out.’

ANARCHIST* ROOTS

May Day’s roots in the anarchist revolutionary workers’ movement are often forgotten and its roots misunderstood. Anarchists like Spies wanted society to be run by the ordinary workers and farmers, not capitalists or state officials. In place of the masses being ruled and exploited from above, society and workplaces should be run through people’s councils and assemblies, based on participatory democracy and self-management.

Anarchism was a global mass movement from the 1870s. Its stress on struggle from below for a radically democratic socialist society appealed to the oppressed in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and the Americas.

The 1880s USA looked like China today: massive factories, poverty, slums and the oppressed working class under the boots of the powerful elite. Anarchist workers fought back. They were central to the US-wide general strike of 1 May 1886, involving 300,000 workers. Unions demanded the 8-hour working day and justice for the masses.

STORM CENTRE

In Chicago, the third largest US city, the elite flaunted its wealth in the face of poor American and immigrant workers. Chicago saw the largest 1 May demonstrations, against the backdrop of terrible working conditions and poverty, worsened by economic depression.

The power of the Chicago movement rested on numbers and, importantly, revolutionary ideas. It was the anarchist International Working People’s Association (IWPA), whose leadership included black women like ex-slave Lucy Parsons, immigrant workers like Spies, and Americans like Oscar Neebe and Albert Parsons, that led a massive march of 80,000 people through Chicago, growing during the following days to 100,000.

Its Pittsburgh Proclamation called for ‘the destruction of class rule through energetic, relentless, revolutionary and international action’ and ‘equal rights for all without distinction of sex or race.’

Internationalist in outlook, the IWPA and the Chicago-based anarchist Central Labour Union (CLU) it led, fought for all working and poor people. It published 14 newspapers, organised armed self-defence and mass movements and created a rich tapestry of revolutionary counter-culture like music.

Anarchists rejected elections in favour of mass organising and education. Elections, the IWPA said, achieved nothing much: the state was part of the system of elite rule which politicians were corrupted into. Instead, most IWPA activists stressed unions as the basis for genuine workers' democracy: factory occupations being one step to an anarchist (free) society.

HAYMARKET MARTYRS

On 3 May, Chicago strikers fought with scabs and the police killed two strikers. The IWPA called a mass protest against police brutality at Haymarket Square. Here, an unknown person threw a bomb at police, who then shot dead many.

The Chicago elite used the clash to crackdown on anarchists. A blatantly biased trial convicted eight anarchists of murder and, against all evidence, for the bombing.

Spies, Albert Parsons, George Engel and Adolph Fischer were hanged in 1887. Louis Lingg defiantly committed suicide in jail. Samuel Fielden, Neebe and Michael Schwab received life sentences.

Rebuilding, anarchists and other socialists formed the Socialist International in 1889. This proclaimed May Day as Workers Day – a global general strike to commemorate the Haymarket Martyrs, fight for 8-hours and build worker unity.

So May Day began as an example of globalisation-from-below and continues to be a rallying point for all workers facing social and economic injustices 120 years on.

STRUGGLES IN BOTSWANA

Botswana migrant workers have a long history of involvement in May Day struggles in southern Africa. This is not surprising: until the 1970s, most waged workers worked outside Botswana.

The achievement of May Day inside Botswana was a long struggle. Independence in 1966 opened a period of stable parliamentary rule, but it did not solve widespread local poverty and inequality.

A teachers' association was formed in 1937 and the first union, the Francistown African Employees Union, was founded in 1948. The 1960s saw the formation of the Bechuanaland Trade Union Congress in 1962 and the rival Bechuanaland Federation of Labour in 1965.

However, unions remained weak into the 1970s. Workplaces were small; the agricultural sector was large. Trade union legislation created obstacles to unions operating and banned political and sympathy strikes.

The Botswana Federation of Trade Unions (BFTU) was formed in 1977, but numbered only 8 registered unions and less than 6,000 members a year later.

However, the working class in Botswana was growing rapidly, especially in mining and the state sector. The number of waged workers rose from 10,000 in 1960, to 60,000 in 1978 – topping the 40,000 Botswana workers in South Africa.

In 1975, Botswana was shaken by a strike of unprecedented scale and violence at the Selebi-Pikwe copper-nickel mine, opening a new chapter of class struggle. The paramilitary Police Mobile Unit was used; workers were fired and then selectively rehired.

The first campaign for May Day followed. Initiated by the opposition Botswana National Front (BNF), it involved demonstrations.

May Day 1978 saw workers demonstrate in Gaborone. Banners supported May Day and criticized government. That evening a commemoration at the Botswana Trade Union Education Centre, formed in 1971 called for an industrial court, a Ministry of Labour dealing with labour issues and a reduction in wage differentials.

In 1979, the BFTU held a May Day event, which presented Public Service and Information Minister, Daniel Kwelagobe, with a memorandum demanding, for example, May Day as an official holiday and changes to the bargaining system.

However, none of these initiatives were successful.

ESCALATING STRUGGLES

The 1980s saw the unions take a tougher stand as relations with the state worsened. They opposed new laws enabling employers to prosecute union actions, easy dismissals and which gave the Home Affairs Minister extensive powers to intervene in unions – especially politically.

May Day celebrations, still unrecognized by the state, continued to be held. In 1989, the public sector Manual Workers' Union (MWU) used May Day to criticize privatisation plans.

In 1995, the MWU congress demanded that May Day be recognised and that Botswana ratify all International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions. Also present were unions from Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe – a sign of the growing power of unions in the region. In the late 1990s, the ILO listed unions in South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe as among the fastest growing in the world.

TODAY, TOMORROW

Finally, in 1996, May Day was proclaimed as a public holiday in Botswana. However, many problems remain. May Day has subsequently been used to fan the flames of discontent. In 2001, for instance, the MWU reiterated the demand that ILO standards be adopted.

Wages remain low, causing strikes in the mines and unrest in the state sector. Despite a growing economy, inequality remains high. In agriculture, land and cattle are often centralised in few hands, pushing more people into waged labour. Privatisation plans remain dominant and, as in the SADC region more generally, the 8-hour day is still not a reality.

CONCLUSION: MAY DAY TODAY

The Haymarket Tragedy remains a symbol of countless struggles against capitalism, the state and oppression. Freedoms won in recent times rest on the sacrifices of martyrs like the IWPA anarchists and the struggles of Botswana's workers.

May Day is a symbol of the unshakeable power of working class solidarity and of remembrance. It must continue to serve as a rallying point for new anti-capitalist, participatory-democratic left resistance.

We need to defend and extend the legacy of the Haymarket affair – to build the working class as a power-from-below for social change.

FURTHER READING

For an in-depth analysis of anarchism's roots and global history: Schmidt, M. & van der Walt, L. (2009). *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*. AK Press: San Francisco

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